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or community, tend to be discussed here in the language of freedom. Today, when asked to choose between freedom and equality, three-quarters of Americans give priority to freedom, a far higher percentage than in Western Europe or Japan. "Being American is to be free," declared a participant in a recent survey of public opinion.6

Despite their devotion to freedom, Americans have not produced many abstract discussions of the concept. There is no equivalent in our literature to John Stuart Mill's On Liberty or the essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," by Isaiah Berlin. American accounts of freedom tend to be historical rather than theoretical. Freedom has provided the most popular "master narrative" for accounts of our past, from textbooks with titles like Land of the Free to multivolume accounts of the unfolding of the idea of freedom on the North American continent. Such works, while valuable in situating the idea of freedom in historical experience, tend to give it a fixed definition and then trace how this has been worked out over time. Generally, they ground American freedom in ideas that have not changed essentially since the ancient world, or in forms of constitutional government and civil and political liberty inherited from England and institutionalized by the founding fathers. In effect, they drop a plumb line into the past, seeking the origins of one or another current definition of freedom while excluding numerous meanings that do not seem to meet the predetermined criteria. Such an approach too often fails to recognize how dissenting voices, rejected positions, and disparaged theories have also played a role in shaping the meaning of freedom. "Our story," declared the cultural critic Allan Bloom, "is the majestic and triumphant march of two principles: freedom and equality." But depicting the history of freedom as a narrative of linear progress fails to note that, as the abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it after the Civil War, "revolutions may go backward." While freedom can be achieved, it may also be taken away.6

In this book, the history of what the historian Carl Becker called this "magic but elusive word" is a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than a set of timeless categories or an evolutionary narrative toward a predetermined goal. The very universality of the language of freedom camouflages a host of divergent connotations and applications. It is pointless to attempt to identify a single "real" meaning against which others are to be judged. Rather than seeing freedom as a fixed category or predetermined concept, I view it as an "essentially contested concept," one that by its very nature is the subject of disagreement. Use of such a concept automatically presupposes an ongoing dialogue with other, competing meanings.6

"The idea of liberty," writes the French historian Marc Bloch, "is one which each epoch reshapes to its own liking." Rather than discussing freedom in the abstract, I attempt to locate it in particular historical circumstances, showing how at different periods of American history different ideas of freedom have been conceived and implemented, and how the clash between dominant and dissenting views has constantly reshaped the idea's meaning. Freedom has always been a terrain of conflict, subject to multiple and competing interpretations, its meaning constantly created and recreated. Definitions of freedom relegated to the margins in one era have become dominant in the next, and long-abandoned understandings have been resurrected when circumstances changed. The meaning of freedom has been constructed not only in congressional debates and political treatises, but on plantations and picket lines, in parlors and bedrooms. The story of American freedom has a rich and varied cast of characters, from Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Sanger, Franklin D. Roosevelt to former slaves seeking to breathe substantive meaning into emancipation during the Civil War.

"New circumstances," Jefferson observed in 1813, "...call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects." The history of freedom offers a unique vantage point from which to probe the depths of American culture, and to view the interconnection between changing patterns of thought and social experience in American history. Because of the word's ubiquity, the study of freedom is more than a semantic exercise. "History," wrote the social critic Henry Demarest Lloyd a century ago, "is condensed in the catchwords of the people."6 Freedom is so central to our political language that it is impossible to understand American history without knowledge of the multifaceted debates over its meaning. This history of the idea of freedom does not claim to offer a comprehensive narrative of the American past. It does contend, however, that viewing that history with freedom as the organizing theme enables us to highlight unfamiliar elements, and to see familiar events and periods in new ways. The history of freedom sheds light on the ideas and purposes of social and political movements. It shows how crises like the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Cold War, when the language of freedom suffused politics and society, have permanently transformed the political culture. What is important is not so much the evolution of a single definition as the multiple purposes to which the idea of freedom has been put, and the broader belief systems these usages illuminate.6

Since freedom embodies not a single idea but a complex of values, the struggle to define its meaning is simultaneously an intellectual, social, economic, and political contest. A morally charged idea, freedom has been used to convey and claim legitimacy for all kinds of grievances and hopes, fears about the present
can be found in "Christian Idea of Freedom," which offers a passionate expression of American freedom. The concept of freedom as a right, liberty, and equality is central to this idea. The document explores the nature and significance of freedom, emphasizing the importance of its preservation and defense in American society.

The excerpt from the document discusses the idea of freedom in the context of American history and society. It highlights the importance of freedom as a fundamental human right and the role it plays in shaping the nation's identity. The passage also touches on the historical evolution of freedom and its significance in the context of American democracy.

The document further elaborates on the challenges and threats to freedom, suggesting that it requires constant vigilance and defense to preserve its ideal. The excerpt underscores the importance of individual liberty and the collective responsibility to safeguard these rights.

In conclusion, the document presents a deep reflection on the concept of freedom, emphasizing its crucial role in the American identity and the ongoing struggle to protect it.
to many modern conservatives, freedom has meant above all the capacity to act according to an ethical standard. This definition stands in uneasy tension with another recurring dimension—personal freedom, or the ability to make crucial individual choices free from outside coercion. In the revolutionary era, freedom as personal choice referred mainly to the realms of democratic politics and religious affiliation. In the nineteenth century, personal freedom came to mean each person’s opportunity to develop to the fullest his or her innate talents. In the twentieth, the “ability to choose” has become perhaps the dominant understanding of freedom, a development abetted by the explosive growth of the consumer marketplace. In the name of personal liberation, the 1960s, a crucial chapter in the history of American freedom, extended freedom of choice into virtually every realm, from attire and “lifestyle” to relations between the sexes.

A final dimension is economic freedom: what kinds of economic relations constitute freedom for individuals in their working lives. The meaning of economic freedom has changed dramatically over the course of American history. For more than a century after independence, this idea centered on economic autonomy, enshrined in the glorification of the independent small producer at the time of the Revolution and the antebellum celebration of “free labor.” As the industrial economy matured and the goal of proprietorship faded for most Americans, alternative definitions of economic freedom came to the fore: “liberty of contract” in the Gilded Age; “industrial freedom” (a say in corporate decision-making) in the Progressive era; economic security during the New Deal; and, more recently, the ability to partake of mass consumption within a market economy.

Useful as a method of imposing order on the myriad ways the idea has been understood and deployed, these dimensions of freedom must not be seen as either unchanging or mutually exclusive. No fixed set of categories can fully capture how freedom is actually experienced and interpreted by individuals embedded in history, or how each definition of freedom influences the others. A protean concept, freedom overshadows the scholar’s carefully constructed boundaries. Many people have held seemingly contradictory definitions of freedom at the same time—“negative” and “positive” liberty, for example (a distinction popularized by Isaiah Berlin), or freedom as a set of individual rights and freedom as group or national empowerment. Freedom has been applied to individuals, communities, families, persons within the family, and to the nation itself, and has been pursued through individual action and collective struggles. What is constant is the debate itself; yet the very preoccupation with freedom provides a point of unity in understanding the American past.

Discussions of freedom inevitably raise the question of what circumstances must exist to allow freedom to flourish. This issue—the social conditions of freedom—constitutes the book’s second major theme. Even those who adopt a purely “negative” definition of freedom as the absence of external coercion rather than, for example, economic autonomy or political empowerment, must identify what constitutes illegitimate coercion. At one time or another, Americans have identified as obstacles to the enjoyment of individual freedom governmental authority, social pressures for conformity, bureaucratic institutions, “private” arrangements like the traditional family, and concentrated economic power. Efforts to delineate the conditions of freedom extend from the era of the Revolution, when ownership of productive property was widely seen as essential to individual autonomy, to the twentieth, when feminists sought to recast gender relations in order to afford women the same freedom as men, and Americans divided over whether poverty and lack of economic security should be seen as deprivations of freedom that the government has an obligation to alleviate. Such debates underscore the fact that discussions of freedom are inescapably political, since under almost any definition they lead directly to questions concerning how public institutions and economic and social relations affect the nature and extent of the options available to individuals. Through consideration of the social conditions of freedom, therefore, the word enters what the historian J. R. Pole has called “the language of justice.”

If freedom has been a battleground throughout our history, so too has been the book’s third theme—the definition of those entitled to enjoy its blessings. It is hardly original to point out that the United States, founded on the premise that liberty is an entitlement of all humanity, blatantly deprived many of its own people of freedom. Less immediately apparent is how the study of freedom calls into question the universalities of what Gunnar Myrdal called “the American Creed”—a belief in the essential dignity of all human beings and their inalienable right to democracy, liberty, and equal opportunity. Many recent writers view this creed as a common theme of our history, a way of transcending the fragmentation that allegedly affects both the study of history and society itself. The study of freedom does, indeed, offer a way of responding to the criticism that the writing of history has become so fragmented and trivialized that it is no longer possible to view American society whole. Our history is more than the sum total of the experiences of the sometimes fractious groups that make up our population. Yet the history of freedom also suggests that the search for a unifying account of the American past needs to be conducted in new ways. It highlights how the universalities of our common culture have
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of what their fellow citizens wish to forget." Americans sometimes "forget" that things which we consider fixed and timeless are in fact constantly changing and contested. The story of freedom is not a mythic saga with a predetermined beginning and conclusion, but an open-ended history of accomplishment and failure, a record of a people forever contending about the crucial ideas of their political culture. In this extended conversation over time, the meaning of freedom is as multifaceted, contentious, and ever-changing as America itself.
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We All Declare for Liberty
of every human being over whom the stars and stripes wave.” For Lincoln, the war’s deepest meaning lay in the “new birth of freedom” occasioned by the abolition of slavery. “In giving freedom to the slave,” he told Congress in December 1862 on the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation, “we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.”

Never was freedom’s protean and contested nature more evident than during the Civil War. “We all declare for liberty,” Lincoln observed in 1864, “but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing.” To the North, freedom meant for “each man” to enjoy “the product of his labor”; to southern whites, it conveyed mastership—the power to do “as they please with other men, and the product of other men’s labor.” The Union’s triumph consolidated the northern understanding of freedom as the national norm. In the process, the meaning of freedom, and the identity of those entitled to enjoy its blessings, were themselves transformed.

Throughout American history, wars have been a vital force in expanding the boundaries of the nation’s “imagined community.” The War for Independence catalyzed abolition in the North. Women would win the right to vote after World War I, eighteen-year-olds during the war in Vietnam. With the Union’s victory in 1865, the abolitionist vision of America also triumphed. Liberty became a universal principle; citizenship was proclaimed the birthright of all Americans. “It is a singular fact,” Wendell Phillips wrote in 1866, “that, unlike all other nations, this nation has yet a question as to what makes or constitutes a citizen.” From the Civil War emerged the principle of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed the equal protection of the laws, regardless of race.

Early in 1865, the Supreme Court, which eight years earlier had declared blacks forever excluded from the American “family,” admitted an African-American lawyer, John S. Rock of Boston, to practice before it. There could no longer be “even the shadow of a doubt,” wrote Francis Lieber, that blacks were citizens, entitled to protection by the federal government. Not simply the logic of liberty but the enlistment of 200,000 black men in the Union armed forces during the second half of the war placed black citizenship on the postwar agenda. The inevitable consequence of black military service, one senator observed in 1864, was that “the black man is henceforth to assume a new status among us.” In the same year Lincoln, who before the war had never supported suffrage for African-Americans, urged Governor Michael Hahn of Unionist Louisiana to work for the partial enfranchisement of blacks, singling out soldiers as especially deserving. At some future time, he observed, they might again be called upon to “keep the jewel of Liberty in the family of freedom.” Racism was hardly eradicated from national life. But by 1865, declared George
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understandings of freedom were joined in a rhetoric of national destiny. "As He
died to make men holy, let us die to make men free," proclaimed "The Battle
Hymn of the Republic." Proponents of America's millennial mission inter-
preted the Civil War as a divine chasteisment for this paramount national sin
(a vocabulary the non-churchgoing Lincoln himself adopted in his second in-
augural address). But with emancipation the war also offered an opportunity
for national regeneration, as well as providing incontrovertible proof of the pro-
gressive nature and global significance of the country's historical development.
Long after the war had ended, Lincoln and the emancipated slave would remain
symbols of freedom and American patriotism.9

"What Is Freedom?"

With the Union's triumph, freedom truly defined the nation's existence. A
"new nation" emerged from the war, declared Illinois congressman Isaac N.
Arnold, new because it was "wholly free." Central to this vision was the ante-
bellum principle of free labor, now further strengthened as a definition of the
good society by the North's triumph. In the free labor vision of a reconstructed
South, emancipated blacks, enjoying the same opportunities for advancement
as northern workers and motivated by the same quest for self-improvement,
would labor more productively than slaves. Meanwhile, northern capital and
migrants would energize the economy. Eventually, the South would come to re-
semble the "free society" of the North, with public schools, small towns, and
independent producers. Unified on the basis of free labor, proclaimed Carl
Schurz, a refugee from the failed German revolution of 1848 who rose to be-
come a leader of the Republican Party, America would become "a republic,
greater, more populous, freer, more prosperous, and more powerful, than any
state" in history.10

The concrete reality of emancipation posed freedom as a historical and
 substantive issue, rather than a philosophical or metaphorical one. It raised in
 the most direct possible form the question of the relationship between prop-
 erty rights and personal rights, between personal, political, and economic lib-
 erty. "What is freedom?" asked Congressman James A. Garfield in 1865. "Is it
  the bare privilege of not being chained? If this is all, then freedom is a bitter
 mockery, a cruel delusion." Did freedom mean simply the absence of slavery,
or did it imply other rights for the emancipated slaves, and if so, which ones:
civil equality, the suffrage, ownership of property? If the abolition of slavery
reinforced freedom's status as the keyword of political discourse, this made con-
tral of its definition all the more important. Instead of a predetermined cate-
gory or static concept, freedom became a terrain of conflict, its substance open
to different, sometimes contradictory interpretations.11

"Freedom," declared one black minister, "lived in the black heart long before
freedom was born." In the slave quarters, a fugitive who reached the North later
recalled, the "constant theme" of conversations was "the desire for freedom." Slaves
could hardly remain indifferent to the currents of thought unleashed by the
American Revolution, or the language of democracy and liberty that cir-
culated in the antebellum South no less than in the North. Nor were they un-
aware of the growing national struggle over slavery's future. Indeed, on the eve
of the Civil War, President James Buchanan warned that "agitation of the slav-
ery question" had inspired among the slaves "vague notions of freedom."12

Slaves' ideas, however, were anything but vague. In bondage, African-Amer-
icans had forged their own understanding of freedom, shaped by their experi-
en as slaves and observation of the free society around them. Adopting the
nation's democratic and egalitarian rhetoric as their own, slaves interpreted it
in light of the compelling biblical story of Exodus, in which a chosen people
suffers a long period of bondage only to be released through divine interven-
tion. Slaves saw themselves simultaneously as individuals deprived of their
rights and as a people lacking self-determination. Thus, freedom meant both
escaping the myriad injustices of slavery—punishment by the lash, the separa-
tion of families, denial of access to education, the sexual exploitation of
black women by their owners—and collective empowerment, a share in the
rights and entitlements of American citizens.13

If slavery was part of God's plan, the outbreak of the Civil War heralded
blacks' impending passage to the Promised Land of American freedom. Atti-
udes and aspirations long hidden from outside scrutiny now burst forth, as the
South's 4 million slaves, unwieldy, entered nineteenth-century America's "pub-
lic sphere." Black preachers and political leaders (often one and the same per-
s) proclaimed a new Gospel of Freedom. God had answered His people's
prayers and the day of Jubilee had come. Long before Lincoln made emancipa-
tion a war aim, blacks, North and South, were calling the conflict the "fre-
dom war." Acting on this understanding, slaves by the thousands in 1861 and
1862 fled the plantations and headed for Union lines, placing the future of slav-
ery on the political agenda and helping to propel a reluctant North down the
road to emancipation.14

In a society that had made political participation a core element of freedom,
the right to vote inevitably became central to the former slaves' desire for em-
powerment and autonomy. As Frederick Douglass put it soon after the South's
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Democracy, as it is now understood, is not a new phenomenon. It has been in existence in this country since the time of its founding. The concept of democracy is rooted in the idea of self-governance, where the people have the power to make decisions that affect their lives. This idea was first codified in the Declaration of Independence, which states that "all men are created equal," and that "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are "inalienable rights."

In the United States, the democratic process is carried out through elections, where citizens vote for representatives who will make decisions on their behalf. These representatives are accountable to the people, and can be removed from office if they do not represent the interests of the electorate.

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the health of democracy in the United States. Many people believe that the system is broken, and that the voices of ordinary citizens are not being heard. This is a concern that should be taken seriously, and steps should be taken to ensure that democracy continues to thrive in the United States.

In conclusion, democracy is a fundamental principle of the United States, and it is essential to the functioning of the country. It is important that we continue to work towards a system that is fair, just, and representative of all Americans.
portunities to acquire property or advance economically, rights northerners deemed essential to a free society, most white southerners insisted that blacks must remain a dependent plantation workforce in a laboring situation not very different from slavery. During Presidential Reconstruction—the period from 1865 to 1867 when Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, gave the white South a free hand in determining the contours of Reconstruction—southern state governments enforced this view of black freedom by enacting the notorious Black Codes, which denied blacks equality before the law and political rights, and imposed on them mandatory year-long labor contracts, coercive apprenticeship regulations, and criminal penalties for breach of contract. Through these laws, the South’s white leadership sought to ensure that plantation agriculture survived emancipation.\(^1\)

Thus, the death of slavery did not automatically mean the birth of freedom. But the Black Codes so flagrantly violated free labor principles that they invoked the wrath of the Republican North. Southern reluctance to accept the reality of emancipation resulted in a monumental struggle between President Andrew Johnson and the Republican Congress over the legacy of the Civil War. The result was the enactment of laws and constitutional amendments that redrew the boundaries of citizenship and expanded the definition of freedom for all Americans.

“Will the United States give them freedom or its shadow?” a northern educator asked from North Carolina in 1866. As the war drew to a close, the Republican-dominated Congress struggled to define precisely the repercussions of the destruction of slavery. Even Congressman William Holman, an Indiana Democrat hardly known as an advocate of emancipation, noted that ““mere exemption from servitude is a miserable idea of freedom.” By 1865, virtually all northerners agreed that property rights in man must be abrogated, contractual relations substituted for the discipline of the lash, and the master’s patriarchal authority over the former slaves abolished. The phrase most often repeated in these debates—the “right to the fruits of his labor”—was thought to embody the essential distinction between slavery and freedom.\(^2\)

Much of the ensuing conflict over Reconstruction revolved around the problem, as Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois put it, of defining “what slavery is and what liberty is.” The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, irrevocably abolished slavery; “that I think,” said one Democratic senator, “ought to be sufficient for the lovers of freedom in this country.” But it was not. “We must see to it,” announced Senator William Stewart at the opening of Congress in December 1865, “that the man made free by the Constitution of the United States . . . is a freeman indeed.” Most insistent on identifying and protecting the basic rights of the freed people were the Radical Republicans, longtime foes of slavery and advocates of freedom as a principle limited to “neither black nor white,” in the words of Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. Freedom, said another Radical, William D. Kelley of Pennsylvania, was “a right so universal that we will guarantee it at whatever cost to the poorest child that breathes the air of our country.” In the wake of emancipation, the legal and patriotic doctrine of “free air” had at length come to the United States.

By 1866, a consensus had emerged within the Republican Party that civil equality was an essential attribute of freedom. The Civil War had elevated “equality” to a status in the vocabulary of freedom it had not enjoyed since the Revolution. At Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke of a nation “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”—an invocation of the Declaration of Independence and a recognition of the inner logic of emancipation. In a remarkable, if temporary, reversal of political traditions, the newly empowered national state now sought to identify and protect the rights of all Americans. The first statutory definition of American citizenship, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, declared all persons born in the United States (except Indians) national citizens and spelled out rights they were to enjoy equally without regard to race. Equality before the law was central to the measure, as were free labor values: no state could deprive any citizen of the right to make contracts, bring lawsuits, or enjoy equal protection of the security of person and property.\(^3\)

But it was the Fourteenth Amendment, approved by Congress in 1866 and ratified two years later, that for the first time enshrined in the Constitution the ideas of birthright citizenship and equal rights for all Americans. The amendment prohibited states from abridging “the privileges and immunities of citizens” or denying them “the equal protection of the law.” This broad language opened the door for future Congresses and the federal courts to breathe meaning into the guarantee of legal equality, a process that has occupied the courts for much of the twentieth century. Although most immediately intended to raise the former slaves to the status of equal citizens, the amendment’s language did not apply only to blacks. The principle of equality before the law affected all Americans, including, as one congressman noted, “the millions of people of foreign birth who will flock to our shores . . . to find here a land of liberty.” Soon afterward, the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, barred the states from making race a qualification for voting. “What humbug to call this a free government,” wrote a New Yorker, “when you will not allow a man to vote, if he happens to be black.” Strictly speaking, suffrage remained a privilege rather than a right, subject to numerous regulations by the states. But by the time Re-
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Reconstruction represented the federal system and with the discourse of Reconstruction, the United States could claim to be a nation of free people. Reconstruction represented the federal government's commitment to the restoration of the Union and the rights of all citizens. The federal government played a crucial role in ensuring the rights of freedmen were protected and in rebuilding the南方 states. Reconstruction also laid the foundation for the development of modern American society and culture.
had its limits. In his remarkable “Composite Nation” speech of 1869, Frederick Douglass condemned prejudice against immigrants from China, insisting that America’s destiny was to serve as an asylum for people “gathered here from all corners of the globe by a common aspiration for national liberty.” Any form of exclusion, he insisted, contradicted the essence of democracy. A year later, Charles Sumner moved to strike the word “white” from naturalization requirements. Senators from the western states objected vociferously. They were willing to admit blacks to citizenship but not persons of Asian origin. At their insistence, the naturalization law was amended to add Africans to the “whites” already eligible to obtain citizenship when migrating from abroad. The ban on Asians remained intact; the racial boundaries of nationality had been redrawn, but not eliminated. The juxtaposition of the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1870 naturalization law created a strange anomaly: Asian immigrants remained ineligible for citizenship, but their native-born children automatically became Americans.24

Advocates of women’s rights likewise encountered the limits of Reconstruction egalitarianism. Like the Revolution, the Civil War unleashed a “contagion of liberty.” Given the era’s intense focus on equality, the movement for women’s suffrage, which had more or less suspended operations during the war to join in the fight for Union and abolition, saw Reconstruction as a golden opportunity to claim for women their own emancipation. Antebellum rhetoric equating the condition of women with slavery took on new value as a vocabulary of protest. No less than blacks, proclaimed Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had organized the Seneca Falls Convention nearly twenty years earlier, women had arrived at a “transition period, from slavery to freedom.” Many believed that women should follow the same path to freedom trod by the slaves. The rewriting of the Constitution, declared suffrage leader Olympia Brown, offered the opportunity to sever the blessings of freedom from race and sex—two “accidents of the body” that did not deserve legal recognition—and to “bury the black man and the woman in the citizen.” The “modern theory of individual rights” so powerfully reinforced by the war and Reconstruction, declared the prolific feminist writer Jane Croly, “demands that a woman shall be free to live her life” as she and she alone determined. Suffrage, insisted a third feminist writer, would secure for women “the freedom of an American citizen” and release her from “political bondage.”25

So, too, women should now enjoy the economic opportunities of free labor. The Civil War had propelled many women into the wage labor force and left many others without a male provider, adding increased urgency to the antebellum argument that the right to work outside the home was essential to women’s freedom. Women, wrote Susan B. Anthony, desired an “honorable indepen-

dence” no less fully than men, and working for wages was no more “degrading” to one sex than the other. To be sure, the racially and sexually segmented labor market fundamentally contradicted the idea that paid work offered a route to female independence. To the end of the century, the largest employment categories for women remained domestic service and low-wage industrial work, hardly paths to economic autonomy. Feminists searched for ways to make real for women the promise of free labor. Every issue of Mary Livermore’s new women’s rights journal, The Agitator, carried stories lamenting the limited job opportunities and unequal pay that confronted females entering the labor market. In The New Northwest, editor Abigail Scott Dunbar (whose writings supported her six children and husband after his business failed) went even further, insisting that “liberty for married women” required remuneration for housework and an equal share in family property.26

At feminism’s most radical edge, emancipation inspired demands for the liberation of women from the “slavery” of marriage. The same “law of equality that has revolutionized the state,” declared Stanton, was “knocking at the door of our homes.” Property in slaves had been abolished, but “the right of property in women” remained intact, and if “unpaid” labor was now illegitimate on southern plantations, how could it be justified within free households? In Stanton’s writings and speeches, demands for liberalizing divorce laws (which generally required evidence of adultery, desertion, or extreme abuse to terminate a marriage) and recognizing “woman’s control over her own body” (including protection against domestic violence and what later generations would call birth control), moved to the center of feminist concerns. These questions, she found, struck a “deeper chord” among her female audience than the right to vote. “Women respond to my divorce speech as they never did to suffrage,” Stanton related. “Oh! How they flocked to me with their sorrows.” “Our rotten marriage institution,” one Ohio woman wrote, “is the main obstacle in the way of woman’s freedom.” Susan B. Anthony, who remained unmarried her entire life, believed that “an epoch of single women” was fast approaching: “the woman who will not be ruled must live without marriage.”27

Even more radical in applying the logic of liberty to personal life was Victoria Woodhull. “This thing we call Freedom,” said Woodhull, a magnetic personality and spellbinding orator, “is a large word, implying a good deal more than people have ever yet been able to recognize!” Rather than “a collection of different and unrelated principles,” Woodhull insisted, freedom was a unitary idea, resting on individual sovereignty in all realms of life. For women, it implied not only the right to vote and full economic equality but “freedom of the affections.” “I am a Free Lover,” the irrepressible Woodhull declared. “I have an
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Thomas Hall told an interviewer in the 1930s, "but they let us be put back in slavery again." But the Reconstruction amendments remained embedded in the Constitution, sleeping giants to be awakened by the efforts of subsequent generations to redeem the promise of freedom for the descendants of slavery. The importance of this accomplishment ought not to be underestimated: repudiating the racialized definition of democracy that had emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century was a major step toward reinvigorating the idea of freedom as a universal entitlement.

Even while it lasted, however, Reconstruction revealed many of the tensions inherent in nineteenth-century definitions of freedom. Efforts to give the former slaves land failed to receive congressional approval. If emancipation, as Douglass had remarked, represented a convergence of the slaves' interests and those of the nation, eventually those interests, and their respective definitions of freedom, were destined to diverge. Only a minority of Republican policymakers, most notably Radical congressman Thaddeus Stevens, sought to resurrect the older view—the view put forward by the ex-slaves—that without ownership of productive property, genuine freedom was impossible. In this respect, the high hopes inspired by emancipation remained unfulfilled.

Soon after the Civil War ended, a group of former slaves on Edisto Island, South Carolina, protested their eviction from land that had been assigned to them by General Sherman shortly after his meeting with Savannah ministers. Landless and homeless, they lamented, they would be economically dependent on their former owners: "this is not the condition of really free men." Long after the end of Reconstruction, a sense of disappointment over the failure to distribute land lingered. "I knows I spected a lot different from what I did get from freedom . . . ." William Coleman, an elderly ex-slave, recalled in the 1930s. "Yes, sir, they should have given us part of Master's land as us poor old slaves we made what our Masters had."

In retrospect, Reconstruction emerges as a decisive moment in fixing the dominant understanding of economic freedom as self-ownership and the right to compete in the labor market, rather than propertied independence. The policy of according black men a place in the political nation while denying them the benefits of land reform fortified the idea that the free citizen could be a dependent laborer: Thus, Reconstruction helped to solidify the separation of political and economic spheres, the juxtaposition of political equality and economic inequality, as the American way. Henceforth, it would be left to dissenters—labor radicals, populists, socialists, and the like—to resurrect the older idea of economic autonomy as the essence of freedom.